

Distance Education: *What You Need to Know*

Considerations and Resources

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May 2002



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Preface

Distance Learning: What You Need to Know is designed to assist South Carolina educators who may be planning to use or are already using some form of distance education in their schools or districts.

Technology in the form of broadband, high-speed connections between computers has created limitless opportunities for both students and teachers. Today, schools can offer their students courses and programs from all over the United States and indeed all over the world.

Such opportunities bring with them perplexing issues for educators and administrators, however. These are some questions that might arise:

- What is distance education?
- When is it appropriate to offer distance education?
- How do we ensure quality in programs that we do not directly supervise?
- What state regulations and policies apply to distance education?
- What sorts of changes do we need to make in local school or district policies in order to operate quality distance education for our students?
- What kinds of technology do we need in order to offer distance education to our students?

We cannot postpone addressing questions such as these because distance education is here now.

The South Carolina Department of Education (SDE) recognizes that distance education is an unparalleled means of increasing the quality and number of instructional offerings to the students of this state. The SDE also recognizes that such an advancement can pose unparalleled challenges as well. Instead of a single teacher standing before a classroom of pupils, the distance education teacher may be separated by many miles from his or her pupils, who may never even sit in a room together.

Each of the challenges and opportunities presented by distance learning technology requires forethought on the part of school administrators. It is the aim of *Distance Education: What You Need to Know* to provide you with a set of resources you can use to guide your school or your district as you set about extending the learning environment for your students and your community.

The authors of this document have not attempted to put together a cookbook with recipe directions for you simply to follow. Instead, they are putting before you a series of key issues to consider, along with appropriate resources that may assist you as you develop strategies for delivering effective distance learning in ways that reflect the issues and needs that are unique to your school and district.



A Case Study

Consider the case of one South Carolina school district, as reported in the *State* newspaper in 2001 and summarized here:



There are not enough hours in the school day for all of the classes Elizabeth wants to take. So the high school junior is taking health at home this year with a computer as her tutor.

Elizabeth is one of about a half-dozen high school students taking advantage of an emerging on-line learning opportunity that the school district plans to expand and share with other districts in the area. In this scenario, students pop a CD into a computer that grants access to a Web site where they find instructions and graphics related to course work.

The program arose from necessity several summers ago when thirteen students failed geometry but no summer school teachers were available. The district found a company that sold on-line learning software and let the students work in the school computer lab with a proctor. All thirteen passed.

Since then, the district has started encouraging the system as a home-based option for students who want to earn a required credit without sacrificing a favorite elective. On-line courses can also be used to offer subjects such as oceanography and Latin that the district cannot provide in a classroom because too few students want them or no teachers are certified to teach them.

Elizabeth and her fellow students are taking advantage of one of the many opportunities made available by the Internet and its ability to reduce the importance of being "at the right place at the right time," as the *State* put it.

Definitions of Distance Education

What is distance education?

In their book *Education: A Systems View* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996), Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley, of the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at Penn State University, describe the key elements of distance education:

- **Distance education** is a system to deliver instruction when the students are not in the same location as the teacher.
- **Distance education** uses a variety of technologies to deliver instruction including e-mail, live video, videotape, and Web-based communication methods.
- **Distance education** requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, and special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements.

Whatever you call it—distance education, distance learning, e-learning, or Web-based education—the aim is the same as that of any other instructional system: student learning.

For glossaries of distance education terminology, point your browser to the “eLearners.com” Web site at <<http://www.elearners.com/services/faq/glossary.htm>> and the University of Idaho’s Engineering Outreach site at <<http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/dist13.html>>, where you will find definitions of terms from *analog* to *World Wide Web (WWW)*.

In the next section, you are presented with a series of *considerations*, as the authors have labeled them out of the recognition that each potential distance education setting is unique and what might work for one may be inappropriate for another. While you will not find the answers within this document, you will be made aware of important things that you need to consider as you determine the best way to proceed with distance education for your students.

Considerations for the Delivery of Distance Education

Consideration:

Course content and assessments must be aligned with the South Carolina curriculum standards.

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

South Carolina has worked hard and invested heavily to create a high-quality system of public schools.

With the passage of the Education Accountability Act (EAA) in 1998, South Carolina’s reform efforts were codified as law. The EAA mandated the creation of a performance-based accountability system for South Carolina schools. As a result, all South Carolina students in grades K–12 are responsible for mastering a body of knowledge and skills specified in the South Carolina curriculum standards. These standards, which are reviewed and revised on a regular basis, are developed by South Carolina educators with input from national experts and are approved by the State Board of Education.

In every South Carolina public school, course content and assessments are to be aligned with these standards. Content standards exist in eight subject areas: English language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health and safety education, physical education, foreign languages, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and the visual and performing arts. Current versions of the South Carolina curriculum standards may be found on the SDE Web site at <http://www.myschools.com/offices/cso/standards_page.htm> and on the SDE’s SCTLC (South Carolina: Teaching, Learning, Connecting) site at <<http://www.sctlc.com>>.

The statewide assessment program in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies includes grades three through eighth. An exit examination is administered for the first time in grade ten. In addition, end-of-course assessments for Algebra 1, English 1, Physical Science, Biology 1, and U.S. History are being developed. These examinations will be administered to high school students when they complete these courses. All statewide tests are aligned with the South Carolina curriculum standards.

As you consider the content of Web-based courses and assessments, it is important that you ensure their alignment with South Carolina curriculum standards so that students will have the opportunity to prepare for statewide assessments.

Consideration:

The technology (computers, network, video, e-mail, etc.) used to deliver instruction must be reliable and adequately supported by technical, clerical, academic, and design personnel. You will be providing services to your students either by using district or school resources or by purchasing services from a vendor.

TECHNOLOGY AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Assuming that you see a need for distance education, how do you begin to find all of the information to answer your questions about the technology of distance learning?

You can find detailed information about distance education on the Web. One of the resources we recommend is the Distance Education Clearinghouse, a frequently cited collection of resources about distance education on-line at <<http://www.uwex.edu/disted/>>. Distance Education at a Glance, at <<http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/distgla.html>>, is the product of the University of Idaho's Engineering Outreach program. The resources are organized into a series of thirteen guides, each covering a single facet of distance education—one of which, as we have mentioned earlier, is a glossary of distance education terminology.

Getting Started with Distance Education

You have two basic choices if you wish to use distance education in your school or district: you can purchase distance education services from a vendor, or you can create and deliver these services yourself.

Distance education requires time, energy, and resources. As a school administrator you know how difficult it is to make your resources stretch to cover all of the basic services you must provide. If you plan to add a distance education component, you must think of where the resources are going to come from, not only to get set up but also to maintain your system.



Consideration:

Instruction must be planned and delivered in ways consistent with a standards-based education system.

STANDARDS-BASED INSTRUCTION

Standards-based instruction places a premium on high-quality instruction, demands that teacher assignments be rigorous and content rich, and demands that students demonstrate mastery of the content. In many schools, the implementation of a standards-based system has required that "business as usual" come to an end. Nevertheless, there are numerous resources to assist teachers and educators as they change their practices to meet the new requirements.

The SDE developed the *South Carolina Standards Implementation Guide*, published for kindergarten through grade five and for grades six through eight, as a key resource in the development of standards-based education. The two editions of the *Standards Implementation Guide* can be found at <http://www.myscschools.com/offices/cso/standards_page.htm>, under the heading "Materials to Support Standards Implementation."

The SDE has several excellent Internet resources to support teachers and administrators as they work to implement standards-based instruction:

The Web site at <<http://www.myschools.com>> has the entire range of information about South Carolina schools. The SDE has also created the SCTL Web site at <<http://www.sctlc.com>> to support classroom instruction. One can find the latest versions of the South Carolina curriculum standards in a fully searchable form on these two SDE sites, as well as thousands of lesson plans. MarcoPolo, at <<http://marcopolo.worldcom.com/>>, also provides lesson plans and features links to other Web resources to support instruction.

Consideration:

How do we
find virtual schools?
What should
we look for
in a
virtual school?

LOCATING A VIRTUAL SCHOOL

A number of states have created “virtual schools” (usually at the high school level) and have opened their doors to students from other states. A number of private companies also offer various levels of distance education services to colleges and schools.

Several Internet resources are worth exploring on this score. Here are two of the best ones:

- The “About.com” distance learning page at <<http://distancelearn.about.com/cs/systems>> will give you some vendors that provide various levels of distance learning services.
- Glenn Hoyle’s Distance Learning on the Net at <<http://www.hoyle.com/distance/classes.html>> provides “finder” links for distance learning courses, programs, and institutions.

While the SDE does not endorse any particular vendor or provider of distance education services, a sample list of virtual schools is provided for your information at the end of this section. It is worth your time to explore the various school sites to get an idea of the range of courses and services available, as well as the costs.

The first consideration is, of course, the kind of services that you want to offer in your school or district. Most distance education programs in the K–12 system enhance the course offerings at the high school level, allowing districts and schools to provide their students with a broader range of classes. For example, distance education could make it possible for some of your students to take an Advanced Placement course or a foreign language class that would not be available if your institution was not able to hire a teacher or begin a program of its own.

Distance education can have other applications as well. For example, students who are home bound for long periods because of illness can use a distance learning program as a means of staying on track with their studies.

Taking a Look at Distance Education Web Sites

Visit some of the Web sites we list in this document, or do a search using a good search engine such as Google. Explore the site and encourage those who will help shape your distance learning programs to do so as well. The sites often provide sample course materials for you to look at. If there are no samples on the site, contact the administrator and request them.

Use this opportunity to involve teachers, parents, and administrators as you work through the selection process.

Keep these questions in mind as you visit:

- Is the virtual school accredited?
- Is it clear who is operating the school? Is the school public or private?
- Is the purpose of the school clear? Some schools are focused on at-risk students or dropouts, while others provide comprehensive services.
- Is the school's privacy policy easily found? Does it protect site users?
- Is the site set up logically so that it is easy to find your way around?

As you review sample course materials, ask yourself these questions:

- Is it easy to log on to the site and quickly find the course materials?
- Are the course materials high quality? Are the learning objectives clear?
- Are the materials and objectives aligned with the South Carolina curriculum standards?
- Is there a system to assess student learning in an effective way?

Find out if other districts and schools in South Carolina have used the virtual school in question. Make direct contact and ask about successes and problems encountered. The South Carolina Partnership for Distance Education, on-line at <<http://www.sc-partnership.org/>>, is a resource you can use to locate existing distance education programs in South Carolina schools. Remember that students' mastery of the knowledge and skills prescribed by the South Carolina academic standards is the criterion for educational success.

Once you have narrowed down your selection list, what should you know before you make a decision?

Ask these questions of the potential service providers you are considering:

- A. How long has the school been offering distance learning courses?
- B. What is the actual cost (counting textbooks, materials, etc.) of a course?
- C. Does the interactive part of your instruction include
 - instructor feedback?
 - class lounges?
 - live chat rooms?
 - on-line mentoring?
 - on-line help?
- D. Are teachers either certified in South Carolina or eligible for reciprocity? *South Carolina certification or eligibility for reciprocal certification in South Carolina is required by state regulation.*
- E. Are the offerings developed or approved by a state department of education or a regionally accredited college or university?
- F. What academic standards are used for the courses? *Remember that South Carolina students are held accountable for subjects in all areas for which there are State Board approved standards.*

- G. *What kind of tutoring or extra help is offered to students who may be struggling with a course?* It is ultimately a local decision as to whether outside-class help will be provided to students. However, in all cases, an aide or proctor must be present to supervise and assist the students while the class is in progress.
- H. *How do students add or drop courses?* Students may add or drop distance education courses just as they would a traditional course at their school. Any restrictions or guidelines required by the course provider must be considered as well.
- I. *What are the technology system requirements for the on-line courses your institution will offer? Will your school need to add any technology infrastructure in order for your students to participate in such a program?*

Distance Education Providers: A Sample

Choice 2000 Charter School

A seventh- through twelfth-grade charter school accredited by the Washington Association of Schools and Colleges

<http://www.choice2000.org/>

Citizens High School

An independent high school established in 1981 to meet the needs of adults seeking to complete work for a high school diploma

<http://www.citizenschool.com/start.htm>

Concord Consortium

A not-for-profit virtual high school

<http://www.concord.org>

Florida Virtual School

A cyberschool that offers accredited, technology-based high school course work

<http://www.flvs.net/>

Indiana High School

High school course work sponsored by Indiana University

<http://www.indiana.edu/~iuhs/>

Kentucky Virtual High School

An on-line educational service offering courses for high school credit and other learning opportunities

<http://www.kvhs.org>

Keystone High School

A cyberschool offering accredited course work that can lead to a high school diploma

<http://www.keystonehighschool.com/>

Louisiana Virtual Classroom

A consortium of high school teachers who develop and teach Web-based courses

<http://www.lcet.state.la.us/distance/>

North Dakota Division of Independent Study

Elementary, middle, and high school courses offered since 1935 by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

<http://www.dis.dpi.state.nd.us/>

United States Distance Learning Association

A nonprofit organization that promotes the development and application of distance education for education and training

<http://www.usdla.org>

Virginia Internet High School

A private company that works with local school districts to provide alternative high school courses over the Internet

<http://www.internet-high.com/va/home.htm>

POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

Consideration:

Our practice should be consistent with our policies.

Do we have policies to cover distance education?

Before you announce that students at your school can take on-line classes, you should check your school and district policies and State Department of Education regulations.

Policies and regulations are meant to provide definitive answers to the kinds of questions that arise in any organization. If your district has a "dress policy," the question of "What shall I wear to school today?" is answered ahead of time. Good policy protects school districts, parents, and students by making clear the roles and responsibilities of each.

In the process of establishing a distance education program, you will need to answer at least six types of questions. It is very important that your school and district establish the answers to these questions in the form of policies and regulations.

1. Academic Questions

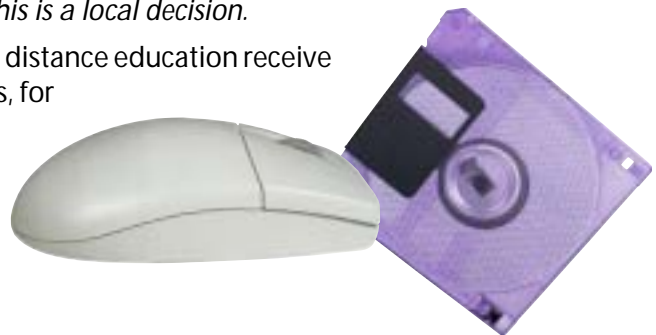
- A. Is there a district-approved list of virtual schools that meet district and state guidelines? *This is a local decision.*
- B. Who will be allowed to take distance education classes? What is the role of the guidance department and administration in identifying when it is appropriate for a student to take a distance education class? *Student requirements for taking distance education courses should be the same as for traditional classroom courses.*
- C. How many distance education classes will we allow a student to take in a year? Will the distance education class be identified on the student's transcript? *The State Department of Education highly recommends that a school consider allowing students to take no more than two distance education courses per year. Distance education courses should be identified on the student's transcript. However, the district may determine how the distance education course is described on the transcript.*
- D. Can we allow a student to take a distance education class if a similar class is already offered at the school? *Yes, if other circumstances prevent a student from taking the similar traditional course, he or she may take a distance education class. Two examples of such special circumstances are schedule conflicts with other courses and a lack of space in the traditional course. It should be remembered, however, that distance education courses are not to be used as replacement courses. Rather, they are resources for providing access to additional learning opportunities for students.*
- E. Will students take distance education classes on their own time or during the regular school day? *If the student takes the class during the school day, state regulations require that there be a proctor or aide present to supervise and assist the student. In addition, 120 contact hours for a full credit or 60 hours for a half credit are required. Courses taken outside of school hours are considered to be correspondence courses. Schools may apply for "innovative program status" if the above requirements cannot be met.*
- F. What kind of evaluation will be used for these courses? Will the course be graded or ungraded? *These are local decisions.*

2. Administrative Questions

- A. Are we in compliance with relevant state regulations? *The local district must make every effort to comply with relevant state regulations.*
- B. Who pays the tuition and covers the costs of textbooks and other instructional materials? Under what circumstances does the school pay, and under what circumstances does the parent or student pay? *These are local decisions.*

3. Faculty Questions

- A. What role will the faculty play in the implementation of the distance education program? Will our teachers be responsible for providing extra help and tutoring for students taking distance education courses? *This is a local decision.*
- B. Should teachers providing support for distance education receive additional compensation (like coaches, for example)? *This is a local decision.*



4. Legal Questions

- A. What policies do we have to protect students, parents, and the district from the dangers and risks in using the Web?
- B. Is our policy on plagiarism and intellectual property updated and relevant to the Internet?
- C. Is our Internet use policy adequate to cover situations that may arise as a result of our distance education program?

5. Student Questions

- A. Will the school provide the same supports for a student enrolled in a distance education course as it does for students enrolled in traditional classes?
- B. Do our counselors and guidance staff have the training necessary to provide good support for students taking distance education courses?
- C. How will tests be administered? Who will be responsible for maintaining test security?

6. Technical Questions

- A. How much will it cost to upgrade our system to make it adequate to cope with distance education? *The policy aspect of this question focuses on how you will cover this new and ongoing cost.*
- B. Is our current technology department adequately staffed and trained to support distance education? *The policy aspect of this question focuses on how the technology support services in your district are integrated into the district and school organization.*
- C. Is distance education addressed in our school and district technology plan?

This list of questions, which is not meant to be exhaustive but rather suggestive of the issues you will need to explore, is drawn from the following sources:

Berge, Zane L. "Barriers to Online Teaching in Post-Secondary Institutions: Can Policy Changes Fix It?" *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 1, no. 2 (summer 1998). Available on-line at <<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/Berge12.html>>.

Gellman-Danley, Barbara, and Marie J. Fetzner. "Asking the Really Tough Questions: Policy Issues for Distance Learning." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 1, no. (spring 1998). Available on-line at <<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/jmainsp98.html>>

King, James W., et al. "Policy Frameworks for Distance Education: Implications for Decision Makers." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 3, no. 2 (summer 2000). Available on-line at <<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/summer32.html>>.



Consideration:
How do we ensure that our students have an educational experience using distance education that is at least as good as they would have in a traditional classroom?

STUDENTS

Distance education brings both new opportunities and new challenges. If it is easy for students to become disengaged in traditional classes taught by teachers who know them, then imagine the potential for detachment in distance education settings.

A school or a district should seriously consider preparing its students for participation in distance education well before the students are enrolled.

Questions such as these will need to be addressed:

- A. Is the student proficient enough in the use of the technology that he or she can resolve common technological problems as they arise?
- B. Has the student been made completely familiar with the software that he or she will use to access the distance education program?
- C. Does the student possess the requisite self-discipline? *The student will often be working at a pace different from that of a traditional classroom and will often be working independently. Even young students will be expected to pace themselves.*
- D. Will the student be knowledgeable about and comfortable with an on-line help system that may include e-mailing instructors, interacting with peers in a chat room, and calling a help desk on an 800 number?
- E. What about special needs students or students who will may have difficulties accessing the Web?

RESOURCES

The following resources will give you ideas about the kinds of training that might be appropriate for students in your school. An interesting research finding of the Software and Information Industry Association is that "Students trained in collaborative learning on computer [*sic*] in small groups had higher . . . achievement, higher self-esteem and better attitudes toward learning than students working individually. The positive effects of collaborative learning were especially pronounced for low ability students and for female students" (*2000 Research Report on the Effectiveness of Technology in Schools: Executive Summary*, on-line at <<http://www.siia.net/sharedcontent/store/e-edtech-sum00.pdf>>).

Texts:

Hara, Norik, and Rob Kling. "Students' Distress with a Web-Based Distance Education Course: An Ethnographic Study of Participants' Experiences." *Information, Communication & Society* 3, no. 4 (2001): 557–79. On-line at <<http://www.slis.indiana.edu/CSI/Wp/wp00-01B.html>>.

United States Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. *e-Learning: Putting World-Class Education at the Fingertips of All Children: National Education Technology Plan*. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education, 2002. On-line at <<http://www.ed.gov/Technology/elearning/e-learning.pdf>>.

Web sites:

- Captioned Media Program
<http://www.cfv.org/>
- Rehabilitative Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America
<http://www.resna.org/>
- SCATP (South Carolina Assistive Technology Project)
<http://www.sc.edu/scatp/>



Consideration:

How does the district help its educators learn everything they need to know to be excellent teachers?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The research on distance education is clear: the teacher's role is of primary importance to student success.

Just as teachers working in traditional classrooms need ongoing and high-quality professional development, so do those providing distance education. The planning and execution of a quality distance education program will require adequate time for professional and staff development activities. If you are purchasing distance education services from a vendor, you will need to ask what kind of professional development is provided for the teachers of students who will be participating in distance learning.

These are traits of effective distance education teachers:

- They plan extensively and evaluate both formatively and summatively.
- They present well-designed syllabi and presentation outlines.
- They are knowledgeable regarding both equipment and effective presentation techniques.

(Source: Egan, M. Winston, Joan Sebastian, and Marshall Welch. "Effective Television Teaching: Perceptions of Those Who Count Most—Distance Learners." *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the American Council on Rural Special Education*. Nashville, TN 1991.)

Consideration:
How do
we plan for
distance education?

PLANNING FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

All instruction has student learning as its principal aim. Effective educational programs do not happen by accident, however. And distance education programs are no different. Successful distance education is the result of careful planning. Fortunately, there are many resources to assist you with that planning. Your first resource should be your Regional

Technology Center (RTC), which you can find by pointing your Web browser to <<http://www.myschools.com/offices/technology/rtc/>> or by contacting Tammy Mainwaring, team leader in the SDE Office of Technology for the Regional Technology Centers.

RESOURCES

- WestEd TechPlan Home Page: Toolkit Components
<http://www.wested.org/tie/techplan/>
- NETC (Northwest Educational Technology Consortium): Technology Planning
http://www.netc.org/tech_plans/index.html
- NCREL (North Central Regional Education Laboratory): Critical Issue: Developing a School or District Technology Plan
<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/technlgy/te300.htm>
- Education Leadership Toolkit: Change and Technology in America's Schools
<http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/>
- Apple Computer's Technology Planning Guide
<http://www.apple.com/education/planning/>



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Texts:

Abate, Anne K. "Support Services for Distance Education." *Eduport Kiosk* (autumn 1999). On-line at <<http://www.eduport.com/community/kiosk/19991/serve.html>>.

Brown, Mary Daniels. "The Voices of Experience." *Virtual High Schools: Part 1*. Education World. On-line at <http://www.education-world.com/a_tech/tech052.shtml>.

Hawkes, Mark. "Criteria for Evaluating School-Based Distance Education Programs." North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. March 2000. <<http://www.ncrel.org/tandl/disted.htm>>.

Rosseel, Trish. "Distance Education: A New Frontier for the OLMS." *ARL* (February 1999): 202. On-line at <<http://arl.cni.org/newsltr/202/disted.html>>.

Tulloch, Jacquelyn B., and Shirley Thompson. "Identity Security and Testing Issues in Distance Education." PBS Adult Learning Service. Summer 1999. <<http://www.pbs.org/als/agenda/articles/testing.html>>.

Web sites:

- Northwest Educational Technology Consortium
http://www.netc.org/tech_plans/index.html
- PBS Adult Learning Service: Teaching, Technology, and Distance Education
<http://www.pbs.org/als/agenda/topics/teach.html>
- United States Distance Learning Association
<http://www.usdla.org>



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